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ABSTRACT

A teacher of English as a Second Language (ESL) to adult migrant workers from Central America describes the evolution of her efforts to create a sense of community within the classroom and Latino center and to empower students to bring about social change in the long term. While students were pressuring the teacher to teach grammar, the teacher was considering ways to increase student access to the language and culture of power. Techniques used at the Latino center to encourage student interaction, cooperation, and leadership include: class coffee breaks; inclusion of homeless immigrants and families in center holiday parties; organization of weekly basketball and soccer games; mentoring to support students in taking responsibility for center activities; delegation to students of some teacher tasks in the classroom (organizing into teams, passing out papers, setting up and cleaning up the room, facilitating discussions); student planning of center events; and hiring of students for Latino center jobs. These efforts eventually became effective after a student protest against an administrative action taken in another organization. The protest was joined by the teacher and her students because they all belonged to a coalition which shared the same concerns. (MSE) (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse on Literacy Education)

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Organizing ESL Students for Social Change

Hilary Stern, TESOL Adult Education Academic Session

March 13, 1997

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When I first began to teach ESL to adults thirteen years ago I was ready to change the world.. I was an avid follower of Paulo Freire and the problem posing method. The method where you would begin with a problem shared by many of your students, read the dialogue depicting that problem, pick it apart and analyze it, and then motivate your students to take some action to better their lives. Along the way, you can throw in a few language exercises and voila, your students were learning to speak, read, and write English as well as change their world. At least that was the theory. Unfortunately, after a few heavy discussions of "Juana's problem" or "Jose's problem" my students soon grew bored with it all and wondered when we would get down to the real business of learning English, to the grammar rules and worksheets, to the longed for "verbos. "Queremos aprender los verbos." "We want to learn verbs" my students would repeat. "Los verbos, verbs" were not important, I answered. " What good are a bunch of grammar rules if you can't communicate." Language was for communication. And communication, as far as I was concerned, was for solving the world's problems. My students, however, were not as interested in solving the world's problems as I was.

Later on, as I began to know my Central American students better and learned of their past lives, I realized that many of them had already been drafted to fight for a larger cause. And that they had fled their country because they did not want to die for that cause. They came to the United States because they wanted a better life, a more peaceful life. And that no matter how poor and oppressed they seemed from my middle class perspective, their life was infinitely better here in the United States than in their native country. Furthermore, they had not registered for my class because they wanted social justice; they had registered for my class because they wanted to learn English. The social justice was my agenda, not theirs.

But I didn't give it up; like a true revolutionary I simply modified my thinking. I began to see further; to think not in terms of classes and eight week sessions, but in terms of community and five, ten and twenty year plans. I could not promote social change only with a people temporarily grouped according to ESL level. I needed to look at other ways that people are grouped. What defines an immigrant community? How do they define it? How do others define it for them? What were some of the other organizations in their community that are already advocating for their rights? How can my work as an ESL teacher support that work?

When I started to think in terms of community and community organizing I saw that I had a unique role to play as an educator. As an educator I could not single handedly change the world, or even inspire my students to single handedly change the world. But I was uniquely positioned to participate in a larger movement. I had access to large numbers of immigrant students who were coming together in groups--the first step in community organizing. I also had groups of students who were coming to learn how to understand their world better--the second step in community organizing, the desire to understand your world better so that you can become a

FL 801 172

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master of it. As an educator, I realized that I was responsible for helping them to take that third step--to see their problems as not only personal but social and to understand that only through social action will many of their problems be solved.

I realized now that my role as an educator in the social justice movement was three fold. First and foremost, I needed to increase my students' access to the language and culture of power by effectively teaching them English and American cultural and social norms, as well as the ability to critically analyze those norms. Secondly, I could help build community in a population that has been uprooted from its own community; and thirdly I could help develop indigenous leadership from among this community.

My colleagues here have all spoken about role #1. While I could add my voice to the chorus and give you some examples of how we do this in our program, I won't. Instead I'd like to focus on points two and three, on building community and indigenous leadership. Finally, I'd like to talk about that final step--about taking social action to address social problems--and our participation as an educational organization in a social change movement.

Many immigrant students are isolated and cut off from a sense of community. Unlike in their own countries, they may be living among strangers, may be afraid for their personal safety, see their neighbors not as their allies but as the enemy. They often live in the poorest of neighborhoods riddled with this society's social ills. They may be afraid to leave their apartments and only venture out to work, to go shopping and to go to school. For many immigrant adults, the ESL classroom may be the only place that they feel safe and among friends, where they can begin to rebuild their sense of community and social networking.

In our program at CASA Latina in Seattle we work with a population that is particularly disenfranchised. We work with Latino migrant workers--not only farmworkers, but urban migrants, Latinos who come from rural Mexico and Central America and live a bi-national lifestyle, migrating around the U.S. in search of work and then returning to their own countries for several months of the year. They come to Seattle to look for work in the fishing industry or in day labor. During their stay in Seattle, most of them are homeless and stay in the downtown missions, shelters, and on the streets. This is a population that is in survival mode and is cut off from the safe embrace of a community Many of them come to our ESL classes, not so much to learn English, but to take a break from the dangerous world out there.

In our program we build community in several ways. In the classroom we build community by following a participatory approach to education, a critical approach to education very similar to the approach described by Brian Morgan. But like I said before, working within a classroom is not enough. A community of learners is not the same as an immigrant community. An immigrant community includes people with all levels of knowledge of the English language. That's why we always include coffee breaks in all of our ESL classes. Coffee breaks are very important, it allows people in all of our classes to socialize and to network. One of our more advanced students, who had stopped coming to class because he had learned enough English for his own purposes, came back to class the other day so that during the coffee break he could talk to some of the women students to get job leads for his mother who was due to arrive from Mexico shortly.

Several other students have told us that our classes have really improved since we started offering coffee breaks. It's great to be able to meet people, they say. Which just goes to show, that no matter how participatory we think our classes are, it's not the same as letting the students loose to meet others on their own terms and not just as part of a class exercise.

In addition, an immigrant community includes family members--elders, children, aunts, uncles and cousins. Since an objective of our program is community building, we don't limit ourselves to working only with our students. For example, last December we organized a Christmas party. Our community advocate spent the month before the party inviting all of homeless Latinos he saw to the party. We had prepared traditional Mexican food, had piñatas and a Santa with Christmas gifts for the children, and had a Mexican folkloric dance group lined up to perform. Our biggest fear was that no one would come. By the time I arrived about a half hour after the party was scheduled to begin, there were over 100 people there-- men, women, and children. By the end of the evening over 200 people had arrived, most of them homeless Latinos. The party was a huge success and CASA Latina gained even more credibility and name recognition within the Seattle migrant Latino community.

Another way we build community is by organizing weekly pickup games of basketball and soccer. One of the hardest things about being homeless, is that your options for recreation are very limited. You can drink on the street corner, but that usually gets you into trouble, especially in Seattle, which has a very strict loitering law. So we try to offer some other ways to socialize. The weekly games of soccer and basketball relieve stress as well as builds relationships. Our community advocate has gained a lot of trust within the community because he plays basketball and soccer with the guys regularly.

If we are to be true community organizers and teach people to "talk back to the world" as Tara says, we cannot take on all of the responsibility of making these community events happen. We must share power with members of our immigrant community. However, our experience has taught us that we can't just say, "You want to have a party? O.K. so organize one." We are working with a population that has not had much experience with power on with taking on leadership roles and doesn't know what to do. So our work is to mentor people and to give them roles of limited responsibility where they will be assured of success. As they gain confidence and skills, we give them more and more responsibility.

In the classroom, we give students teacher roles-- they call on each other, they organize themselves into teams, they pass out papers, they set up the room, they clean up, they facilitate discussions. We delegate anything we can.

For the parties and events, committees of students help plan the events. In the pick up sports games, the community advocate appoints one person to act as the point person for the game. He carries the ball; he's the one to go see if you want to play. Sometimes, the community advocate doesn't even go along and the point person is also responsible for returning the ball.

In our staffing, we also hire students. Our bookkeeper is a former student. An outreach worker is a former student. Many of our volunteer street theater workshop leaders are former students.

One of the interesting things that happen when we begin to share power, is that besides the fact that our students help us do what we want to do, they sometimes change the direction of where we were going. When you share power, be prepared to change plans. For example, after our staff began to plan the Christmas party, I told the party organizer that he had to convene a student committee to help out. At first he was resistant because the last time they were asked to help, they didn't follow through with anything. But I insisted and he did convene a couple of committees--one in our morning classes and one in our evening classes and lo and behold, they changed our plans! We had already invited a band to play but they didn't want a live band, they preferred taped music. The staff wanted to serve a traditional American Christmas dinner but they wanted Mexican food. So we changed our plans and put them in charge of the bringing the music and organizing the food. Perhaps that is why the party's success exceeded our wildest dreams.

Another time, when we were leading a workshop on the rights of undocumented workers, the discussion turned to their discontent with the firing of a beloved ESL teacher from another organization. The community advocate guided them in thinking about what they could do about it. They decided to write a letter to the Executive Director and the Board of Directors expressing their discontent. Later the community advocate came to me all worried. What had she done? She had started to organize Latino homeless against a sister organization. What's more, this was an organization with which we had only recently begun to develop good relations. We decided that we would be supportive of the men but would not participate actively in their plans-- we would not type up their letter or arrange for a meeting with the director. I also called the Executive Director of that organization and told him what was happening and what our participation in this was. He told me that they had already come to him and complained and that he had told them that what he did in his program was none of their business and that they were guests in his house and that when he told them to leave, they should leave. I was horrified and politely disagreed with him. In the end, the men at the workshop wrote a handwritten protest letter in Spanish and had it signed by over 100 homeless Latinos. They turned it in to the Board of Directors. The teacher was never reinstated, but the Executive Director, who was actually only an interim Executive Director and who was applying for the job of Director , was not hired in the end. How much this had to do with their letter, I will never know. But I do have to say that this type of social action was not what we had in mind when we organized the workshop on undocumented worker rights.

Which leads me to talking about taking that final step-- taking social action to change unjust social systems and institutions and our role as ESL teachers in a social change movement.

I believe that true social change cannot take place merely by teaching people to become critical thinkers. In theory, it should happen-- if everyone who needed our classes came to us and stayed with us long enough to be successful critical thinkers then sure, we could change the world. But you and I know that that's not going to happen, don't we? And social change needs to happen faster than we can teach all of our students. As Elsa Auerbach mentioned, literacy is a piece of the puzzle of a new just society but only a piece. There are many other organizations working for social change and we have to work alongside them. In Seattle, there are religious groups, legal aid societies, labor organizations, student political action groups, and homeless advocates, just to

mention a few. All of these groups are organized into one coalition or another. We belong to five different coalitions. Now that's a lot of meetings. But it's worth it because then we can join efforts. For example, during a lesson last week on personal hygiene needs where we practiced asking for a comb, a towel, a shower, the bathroom, etc. we also talked about the existing resources for homeless people to wash up and get their personal hygiene needs met. We also talked about the need for public restroom facilities in the downtown area and told our students of a demonstration happening that same day after class about a few blocks away. So we brought some students along to the demonstration. This would not have happened if we were not connected to the other organizations that had organized the demonstration.

To conclude, we must work together in coalitions and speak and act with one voice. It is a long struggle and too big of a job for one teacher or organization to accomplish alone.